

West Virginia Department of Veterans Assistance

Fall Listening Tour Comprehensive Summary

November 20, 2013

Introduction:

West Virginia Department of Veterans Assistance Cabinet Secretary Rick Thompson, along with other department staff, hosted listening tour events at five locations throughout the state during the month of September. These events provided veterans an opportunity to ask questions and comment on various veteran related issues. The summary highlights the issues most frequently discussed at these events and which the Department perceived to be the most important to West Virginia's veterans. Actions currently underway or plans to be implemented by the Department in response to these issues are also identified in the following report.

Number of attendees:

Beckley	46
Barboursville	47
Clarksburg	31
Martinsburg	17
Moundsville	10
Total	125

General Overview of Findings:

1. Veterans seem to be pleased, overall, with the services, facilities and programs overseen by our department. There is one service in particular they suggest we expand - itinerant visits.
 - a. *Details/Background/Response:* Currently, some of our veterans service officers and social workers host regularly scheduled visits (usually once or twice a month) to various locations throughout the counties assigned to their specific region (i.e. senior centers, VFW posts, VA Medical Centers, etc.). By sending staff to these locations, outside their normal offices, our services are accessible to veterans who live in rural areas and/or have transportation, health, financial or other issues.
 - b. There appears to be a need for more of these regularly scheduled visits throughout the state. We plan to increase this service to the extent possible.
2. There is a general lack of awareness of services available to veterans – including those provided by state and federal governments (as well as private entities).
 - a. *Details/Background/Response:* We intend to publish a small, concise veterans' resource guidebook that contains contact information for veteran related services, categorized according to specific areas of need (i.e. employment, education, financial assistance, counseling, etc.). Members of

our staff are currently in the process of conducting research and collecting the necessary information for the development of such a resource.

3. There is a need for increased coordination and communication between state government and federal government entities that deal with veterans' issues. Specifically, this includes the West Virginia Department of Veterans Assistance, the West Virginia Legislature, the US Department of Veterans Affairs and members of our Congressional Delegation.
 - a. *Details/Background/Response:* The first step in the process of improving coordination between agencies was taken during the listening tour, as representatives of every office referenced above attended at least one event (and many attended all five). Relationships have been initiated and all parties have expressed their commitment to working together.

Other Recurring Veteran Concerns (state level):

1. Veterans would like the state to establish another Veterans Nursing Facility (similar to the one in Clarksburg) in the southern region of the State.
 - a. *Details/Background/Response:* The possibility of creating a new Veterans Nursing Facility is already being explored. A steering committee was created in the summer of 2013 that is currently investigating location options in Beckley and Huntington.
2. There were a variety of questions about the Veterans Transportation Program (funded by us, but operated by the Disabled American Veterans). There is a general lack of awareness about the availability of this program as well as how it is operated.
 - a. *Details/Background/Response:* Some questions were in regards to the process involved for veterans wishing to utilize transportation services. Those questions were answered on the spot and veterans were provided the appropriate contact information.
 - b. Other questions related to the delayed payments of this program's volunteer drivers. A general response was provided explaining the program's budget. We recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the DAV and are currently working with them to improve operations and awareness of the program.
3. Concern was expressed over how few veterans actually utilize the education benefits available to them.
 - a. *Details/Background/Response:* Though most education benefits are provided by the federal government through the GI Bill, our department signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Higher Education Policy Commission and Community and Technical Colleges in August, 2013, agreeing to cross train employees so that more West Virginia veterans can be made aware of these benefits and can receive guidance with obtaining them.

Other Recurring Veteran Concerns (federal level):

1. The majority of veteran's concerns related to federal issues were in regards to the VA Medical Centers (there are four in West Virginia: Beckley, Huntington, Clarksburg and Martinsburg). Some positive experiences were conveyed, but many complaints also emerged including language barriers between doctors and patients, extended waiting room times, and limited physician attention.
 - a. *Details/Background/Response:* This does not fall within our purview, so many questions were fielded by representatives of the federal VA and/or congressional delegation staff members.
 - b. It seems that individuals who have reached out to the WVDVA or elected West Virginia officials, who then communicate with federal representatives, have had issues related to VA Medical Centers resolved much more quickly than others. This is a testament to the importance of continued cooperation among government bodies.
2. Veterans are unhappy with the wait time involved with the claims process, generated by a major backlog in the federal VA.
 - a. *Details/Background/Response:* This does not fall within our purview and there is very little that our department can do to improve this problem; however, there are two ways we can slightly effect wait time for veterans' claims.
 - b. Our veterans service officers are available to assist veterans in applying for and appealing claims. Their guidance helps ensure applications are submitted correctly the first time and veterans who are appealing a case are sufficiently prepared, therefore, eliminating extra interruptions in the claims process. This means, we must remain focused on increasing awareness of this service through various outreach efforts.
 - c. Our field and claims offices are in the process of transitioning from a paper based processing system to an electronic-based system. This will decrease the amount of time it takes for a claim to get from our field offices to our claims offices and on to the federal VA. Thus, processing time should be slightly improved.